

“God our Father, creator of all, today is the day of Easter joy.” So begins a favorite prayer of mine.

EASTER IS THE FEAST OF JOY!, and so, I think, a good time to reflect on the role joy has in our lives of faith.

Father James Martin, a Jesuit priest, author of the book, “Between Heaven and Mirth. Why Joy, Humor and Laughter Are At the Heart of the Spiritual Life” distinguishes between joy and happiness; often seen as synonymous in popular culture.

Happiness, Father Martin notes, is an emotion, and/or an emotional state; and a very pleasurable one at that. Who doesn't want to be happy? Many things can make us happy. We need to enjoy them and the happiness they bring. Being an emotion, however, like all of them, happiness eventually passes.

Joy, on the other hand, Father Martin states, is the product of a loving relationship, of knowing another's love for me despite all and, in return, my response of total love. Joy, unlike happiness, is not a fleeting emotion. Even when one is not feeling happy, joy can still be present. Religious joy is always about a relationship.

Religious joy has an object and that object is God and God's permanent unconditional love for us. The ultimate response to the good news of God's love for us is joy; joy that is lasting and can endure even in the midst of difficulty. Christian life is not always happy. Sickness, tragedy, difficulty and death visit the lives of Christians just as much, (and for some it seems even more so) than for other people. Sadness, disappointment, and grief are natural responses to pain, suffering, tragedy and death. To pretend otherwise or suppress them is not human. Here is where joy enters in. Despite the tragedies, sufferings and deaths of life, Christians can live in joy because they know that even in these most difficult circumstances they are loved by God, a God revealed as faithful to his promises. The ultimate proof of God's love and fidelity is Jesus. Through Jesus God took on our humanity, its joy and happiness, sadness and tragedy and,

ultimately, death. Totally immersed in our life and death, our humanity assumed by Jesus was definitively united to the life of God which cannot die, transfigured and raised from death, clothed with divine power and glory. Through Jesus, God offers every person his invitation of love and this same promise of resurrected life.

The Church's sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the Holy Eucharist are the primary outward visible means through which a person receives, enters into, and remains in the life and love of God offered through Jesus. This relationship brings joy, a joy as St. Paul proclaims in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans, no power in heaven or on earth (save ultimate rejection of God's love through sin) can destroy. Eternal life, resurrected life, heaven are not states that await us after this life, much less rewards to be earned. Eternal life, resurrected life, heaven is a relationship lived now, the presence of Jesus within myself as well as every believer through which we live, speak, and act as this life continues to unfold through the events and people of daily life to ultimately be revealed through death when we finally behold God-in-Christ face to face.

Pope Francis in a reflection I recently read states: "Jesus is the Word made flesh, the word of life that the first apostles and disciples saw and heard and touched with their hands. They were blessed not so much because they could see Christ in the flesh but because it was the Father who revealed him to them. Into this blessed state will enter all of us if we trust not in the revelation of the flesh and blood but rather open our hearts to the Father's supreme revelation, his great gift to us."

God our Father, creator of all, today is the day of Easter joy. This is morning on which the Lord appeared to men who had begun to lose hope and opened their eyes to what the scriptures foretold: that he must first die, and then he would rise and ascend into his Father's glorious presence. May the risen Lord breathe on our minds and open our eyes that we may know him in the breaking of the bread and follow him in his risen life.

JOY TO ALL OF YOU THIS EASTER AND ALWAYS!